

# **Identity Politics in Aladdin – From Arabian Nights To Disney Animated Film**

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## **Abstract**

This is a study of ecranisation of a popular folktale “The Story of Aladdin and the Wonderful Lamp” from the Arabian Nights that is filmed by Walt Disney Feature Animation under the title “Aladdin” (1992). The comparison is included into ecranisation perspective that focuses on the identity constructed in those two narration. First, the study applies the ecranisation concept that compares the transformation of those two works, the folktale and the film. The comparison focuses on the identity politics constructed in those texts. The comparison is analyzed through Fairclough’s Critical Discourse Analysis, by applying the three stages of analysis. The first level is micro level, on the language practice. In the second level, mezo level, discusses the discourse practice that covers the intertextuality of ideas, concept as the reference in delivering the ideas. In the third level, macro level, it interprets the social context of particular events, especially the social practice in exercising their power. The discourse analysis is aimed at understanding the identity politics constructed in both of the works. Through this kind of analysis, it can be found out that the changing of identities constructed in the film has a social political context. The finding shows that the Disney’s Aladdin constructs the identity that is completely different from the folktale of Aladdin. The Aladdin’s identity in the folktale is connected with the traditional Muslim in 10th century Chinese cultural setting, while the identity constructed in the Disney’s animated film is Aladdin in Arabic setting with the American mind and values of freedom and heroism.

**Keywords:** Aladdin, Arabian Nights, CDA, Hollywood, Identity politics, Walt Disney

## **Introduction**

In the creative world nowadays, the advance of technology enables greater opportunities for the transformation among different genres of work of art. In his book, *Novel dan Film* (1991) Pamusuk Eneste provides the term ecranisation that becomes the reference in the analysis of ecranisation or film adaptation in general. The term ecranisation is originated from “ecran” means screen – and this term is associated with the transformation process from the literary works into film or filming literary works. However, the theory is not strongly established yet. The ecranisation focuses on the transformation from a literary work into film, from verbal language into audiovisual medium. The transformation covers the process of reduction, addition, and various changes from the literary works into film.

The transformation process from literary works into films brings some consequences such as reduction, addition, and various changes. The changes are due to the different medias

(verbal and audio visual) with different characteristics. In literary works the illustration or description is done through the use of language or verbal devices. In film, the description and narration is articulated through audio visual devices to provide series of events.

As a reader, we can find out the description of characters in novels not only through what the characters say, but through the characters thinking, or what is said about them in the narration. A narrator mediates the meaning of what we read through his or her point of view. However, in film, the narrator largely disappears. Sometimes a narrator's perspective is kept through the use of a voice-over, but generally the director, cast, and crew must rely on the other tools of film to reproduce what was felt and thought.

The major difference between film and books is that visual images stimulate our perceptions directly, while written words can do this indirectly. Reading the word "orchid," for instance, requires a kind of mental "translation" that viewing a picture of an orchid does not. Because of the 'mental process of translating and perceiving' verbal language in literary works enables the reader to build a wider imagination than that is given by audio visual pictures. Film gives a more direct sensory experience than reading, besides verbal language, there is also color, movement, and sound.

The film also has limitation in its time allotment. It should be presented in usually not more than two hours. While in novel there is not constraint of time, it can be presented in 100 or 500 pages. A literary work or novel is produced by one person, the author. While the film can not be produced only by one person, it is the product of a team work, the screenwriter, director, casts, and other crew of a film production.

Filming a literary work also involves an activity of visual interpretation, that is interpreting the literary works into an audiovisual work. The interpretation process is done especially by the screen writer and film director, beside the team of filmmakers such as casts, cameramen, wardrobes and others. In the process of filming the literary work, it enables us to have reduction, addition and variation of changes in the elements. Reduction can be in the form of reducing or cutting the elements of plot, number of characters, characterization, and setting. That is why not all elements in the novel can be (or necessarily) presented in the film.

The addition, variation and changes also possibly happens in filming the literary works, that covers the aspect of the ideas of narration, style of narration, characterization, setting or the situation. To get a deeper and more meaningful analysis on the transformation from literary works into a film, it is not enough to scrutinize the reduction, addition, and changes. It is necessary to apply another method, of which this study I apply a Critical Discourse Analysis.

For that reason, this paper is going to explore the methodological aspect of ecranisation, by applying the Critical Discourse Analysis in analysing the film adaptation. This paper aims at giving the insight on the methodological framework on the the analysis of literary work-

film transformation by applying CDA, by focusing the analysis on the identity construction in Aladdin.

The story of "Aladdin" is part of the folktales from the book "Alf laylah wa-laylah" which is a collection of West and South Asian stories and folktales compiled in Arabic during the Islamic Golden Age, in the era of Abbasid Chaliph around 10th century. It is often known in English as the Arabian Nights, from the first English language edition (1706), which rendered the title as "The Arabian Nights' Entertainment." This story is very popular in Western countries since it was firstly translated into French by Antoine Galland in 1704. It was translated into English edition in 1706. Since then, there have been more than 10 translation in English. The Arabian Nights consists of hundreds tales, and one of them, is the tale of "Aladdin and the Wonderful Lamp" that will be discussed in this paper, which is taken from the Arabian Nights Entertainment translated by Edward William Lane (1838-1840) and revised by Stanley Lane-Poole which is published online in [www.bartley.com](http://www.bartley.com).

The story of "Aladdin and the Wonderful Lamp" has been adapted into many other medias such as television film series, animated film, and video games. One of the most popular is the animated film produced by Walt Disney Feature Animation, under the title "Aladdin" which was released on November 22, 1992 by Walt Disney Pictures. Although "Aladdin" was released on November but it was the most successful movie in 1992, earning over \$217 million in revenue in the United States, and over \$504 million worldwide ([boxofficemojo.com](http://boxofficemojo.com)). The success of this film worldwide is supported by the distribution system of Disney corporation as the example of the domination of US film industry in the world (Crane, 2014: 377).

### **CDA (Critical Discourse Analysis)**

Fairclough (1989) defines CDA as analysis on discourse in systematical way to explore the relation between the discursive practice, text and event. CDA also relates the process of social and cultural structure in wider sense to search that such event is practiced and ideologically formulated by power relation and conflict covered it. The analysis is also used to search how the relation between discourse and society take roles to make sure the power and hegemony (Fairclough, 1989).

Fairclough develops discourse approach for media that is drawn from a functional systemic analysis discourse by M. A. K. Halliday, and theory of discourse developed by Foucault. Fairclough's CDA is based on three components: text, discourse practice, and social practice. The text in Fairclough's CDA covers the micro level such as diction, words, syntax, vocabulary and syntax, and macro level is the social context of the text. Discourse analysis is related to the way a text is constructed, interpreted and distributed. Analysis on social practice focuses on the relation of discourse and ideology and power (Bell, 1998: 142–62).

In Fairclough's CDA, the problem of "natural" and "taken-for-grantedness" is an important concern. Social institution has discursive formation in its ideology, in which the dominant

discursive ideology marked by its ability to present the ideology as natural, so that it will be accepted as natural, rational and not ideological. Social interaction depends on the ideology of “naturalness”, and “denaturalization” toward the ideology is the aims of the discourse analysis using critical perspective (Fairclough, 1995: 27).

According to Fairclough, ideology as system of thought motivate the emerge of discourse. So that by scrutinizing the discourse, we will find out the work of ideology inside it. Ideology is related to the social order system such as Islamism, capitalism, Marxism, or structure around the concept such as militarism or Islamophobia. When we do the analysis of discourse, the first time we have to find out the discourse and ideology built it. Ideology represents reality, particular construction of identity to legitimate particular world view and support particular domination.

CDA by Fairclough and Van Dijk share the same things, both of them make the analysis framework. According to Fairclough, it is in three levels of analysis; text, discourse practice that is the process of production and consumption, and the third is context of sociocultural that is social and cultural structure related to the event communication. (Fairclough, 1995b, p. 57; Chuliaraki & Fairclough, 1999, p. 113). Van Dijk on the other hand, states three dimension of analysis: discourse, sociocognition, and analysis of social practice. The difference between Fairclough and van Dijk is the second dimension, van Dijk calls it “social cognition,” mental model mediating between discourse and social analysis, while, Fairclough says that the dimension is the practice of discourse – consumption and production of text (Fairclough, 1995b, p. 59).

CDA gets important contribution from Theo Van Leeuwen (2006) with the framework of analysis on social actor in visual communication that can be applied in representing visual “other.” There are two question, “how is people described?” and “what is the relation between people in the picture and the audience ?” In analysis of visual text, three dimension to identify the relation between people in the picture and audience, as Theo van Leeuwen (2006) said, first, “social distance,” between the people in picture and audience. Second, “social relation,” relation social between people in picture and audience. Third, “social interaction,” social interaction between people in the picture and audience. Relation of the three dimension are simbolical imaginaire relation. As audience we can see the object or people in picture as stranger, friend, or they are lower, above us, interact with us or not, and et cetera (Van Leeuwen, 2006: 137-138). Social distance describes the interpersonal relation with others. Distance shows the relation with others, permanently or temporarily. In picture, distance is simbolical. People shot in long distance is seen as stranger while people shot closely or “close-up” seen as part of us.

Gunther Kress and Leeuwen (2006) interprets vertical as, different power. Looking down to other people is practicing simbolical imaginary power toward the people. High position created in real life is shaped through stages, balcony, and other device that literally lifting someone social status. Looking others paralel with the eye-sight connotates with equality.

Social interaction factor discusses the people in the portrait look at the audience or not. Not looking at the audience means that they give opportunity to the audience to be observed objectively, in distance, in which the picture makes us see them as someone who do not aware of being observed, as “voyeurs,” not as people directly make interaction. If they look at us directly the picture articulate challenge symbolically. The person in the picture wants something from us – marked by other element in picture: facial expression, gesture, and others. There are three key factors: —distance, angle, and the gaze .

### **Identity Politics**

Identity politics refers to the way people construct self identity, or people construct other identity. As a politics, the identity constructed has purposes, it is intentionally done. According to Castells (2010: 6) identity, is “ the process of construction of meaning on the basis of a cultural attribute, or a related set of cultural attributes, that is given priority over other sources of meaning.” Castells (2010: 7-8) proposes three forms and origins of identity building. First, “legitimizing identity” introduced by the dominant institutions of society to extend and rationalize their domination vis a vis social actors.

“Resistance identity” is generated by those actors who are in positions/conditions devalued and/or stigmatized by the logic of domination, thus building trenches of resistance and survival on the basis of principles different from, or opposed to, those permeating the institutions of society, as Calhoun proposes when explaining the emergence of identity politics. Third, “project identity”, when social actors, on the basis of whatever cultural materials are available to them, build a new identity that redefines their position in society and, by so doing, seek the transformation of overall social structure.

### **“Aladdin” Politics of Identity in the Folktale and Disney Film**

#### **Social-geographical Context for “Barbaric Identity”**

In the Folktale of “The Story of Aladdin and The Wonderful Lamp (TSAWL), Aladdin’s identity is constructed as a boy living in the social cultural context of a Muslim community in Chinese village. In this social context, it is told that the Aladdin boy lives in a poor family, with his mother in a very simple home and they live in a relatively happy Muslim community without any distinct social problem. The conflict of the story does not come up from the social and geographical aspect in where they live.

In such traditional community, Aladdin boy lives as a boy who spends his time to play with his friends, does not have yet any deep thought on serious education nor on the ‘future’. His father has a traditional job as a tailor, but he is a poor man he could not send his boy to study craft or business. Instead, he asks his boy to learn in his own shop to study the trade

of tailoring, but the boy was not a good student. He did not do as his father instruct. After the death of his father, Aladdin's mother sells the shop and does something to make a living, spinning cotton. The traditional village life construct Aladdin's identity as a poor village boy with the characteristic of a fool and innocent one.

In Disney's Aladdin, Aladdin's identity is constructed as a grown up poor orphan boy living in fictional town of Agrabah. Aladdin has no family, no parents and he only lives with his pet named Abu, a monkey that accompany Aladdin and sometimes help him in solving many problems. Aladdin boy lives in a market, not a real normal home and he makes some tricks to get something (bread, fruit) to eat with Abu. Aladdin is an Arab boy, living in Agrabah.

In Disney's Aladdin, the fictional name Agrabah refers to a place of what we call Arabian peninsula, because the narrator in the animated film says the characteristic of the desert, hot temperature, camel as the mode of transportation, and people's names are mostly in Arabic language. The characteristic of the people and the place takes important roles in building the conflict in the story. In Disney's Aladdin, when the narrator talks about the name of the place he also describes the characteristic of the people. He mentions this characteristic explicitly in an opening song, entitled "Arabian Nights".

Oh I come from a land,  
from a faraway place  
Where the caravan camels roam  
Where they cut off your ear  
If they don't like your face  
It's barbaric, but hey, it's home

The barbaric identity is constructed through this opening song in which the narrator constructs Agrabah as a land faraway (far from the Western countries) with the specific characteristic of roaming caravan camels. The place with many caravan camels roaming refers to the desert areas in Middle East countries. The most critical description that the narrator mentions is the controversial words describing the barbaric identity of the people "where they cut off your ear/ If they don't like your face. Its barbaric /but hey its home." This lyric says that the people in Arab countries where the land this song refers to is described as a barbaric people. They called themselves as barbaric with the example of the barbaric behavior that "they cut off your ear if they don't like your face." Indeed this is a barbaric behavior in this modern age. Such practice of cutting the ears of the enemy is a tradition of military or troops when they were in war in old times, and as the evidence of their victory many of them cutting the enemy's ears after killing them, and bring the ears home as the evidence of victory.

In the next lines it states that "it's barbaric but hey it's home." This implies that the narrator realizes that the cruelty is indeed a barbaric action, but he (represented as the common Arab man) happily admits it as part of natural things to do. Ironically, this label of barbarism in the song lyric is sung in a cheerful tone. This means that this barbaric action is

constructed and admitted as a natural and daily social practice. The narrator is a vendor of second-hand things, a common folk who makes a living by selling the second-hand goods, and he admits barbarism as “its home” that connotes to something common, accepted as daily practice.

The identity of barbarism for the Arab in that song, ignites controversies in real life. Arab American community, in USA, were insulted to be called barbaric. They did not accept the bad stereotyping of their identity so that they protested. The Arab American Anti-Discrimination committee protested the stereotyping of the animated film, and demanded the omission of the Arab stereotyping. Because of this protest, right after the *Aladdin* was released in 1992, the lyric of the song was changed in the home video version released in the following year, 1993. The lines “where they cut off your ear/ If they don’t like your face” were replaced with “where it’s flat and immense/ and the heat is intense.” However, the next line, “It’s barbaric, but hey, it’s home” is maintained. The change still constructs the ‘barbarism’ that is embedded to the people. The constructed setting of place in Disney’s *Aladdin* shows that this animated musical film intentionally stereotypes the Arab people and the labeling of barbarism to the Arab people.

### **The Identity of “Family Man” vs “Free Man”**

The constructed identity of “family boy” is narrated in the folktale of “TSAWL”. This can be found out in the narration of a mother-son relationship in TSAWL. Aladdin’s mother is a poor widow who takes care of her only son after the death of her husband. It is also described that the mother is responsible for nurturing the boy and she has important roles for Aladdin when he is a boy and when there are problems caused by a stranger (the Moor). The relation and interaction of Aladdin boy and his mother is tested when Aladdin gets problems when as a boy Aladdin is fooled by the Moor, and when Aladdin have to “conquer” Sultan, and when Aladdin gets troubles after marriage.

The mother is constructed with identity of simplicity and piety. She is also described as a very good and wise mother. Aladdin will always go to the mother to consult and talk about anything, and ask for her permission for anything he does. Aladdin’s mother is also described as an old woman who is pious, who always perceives that any food and well-being she got is from the God Most High. Aladdin also has similar understanding that the Jinn who helps him with the food or anything is no other than the extended hand of the God Most High. Aladdin always says that all he obtains are from God and he always prays for God’s help to overcome his problems. When he was trapped in a cave under the ground, Aladdin prays:

“I testify that there is no God but thee alone, the mighty, the omnipotent, the all-conquering, the quickener of the dead, creator of needs and fulfiller thereof, who dispellest troubles and anxieties and turnest them into joy. Thou sufficest me, and thou art the best of protectors; and I testify that Mohammad is thy servant and apostle. O my God, by his favour with thee, release me from this calamity.”

The story of Aladdin in TSAWL constructs the identity of simple pious Muslim family (mother-son Aladdin), Muslim people in the sense that they embrace the concept of "Islamic tauhid" (the core faith in Islam that Allah is the One). The Islamic values are applied in their daily life. Aladdin as a boy in his ten years old is not a thief and he is just a little bit lazy and not focused yet to learn a particular skill that he makes a living. When he gets the treasure from the Jinn, Aladdin and his mother did not submit themselves to the Jinn. They keep thanking to God the Almighty who has given them all they have obtained. Aladdin also explicitly testifies that Prophet Mohammad is the apostle and servant of God. Aladdin's mother denies to deal with the Jinn, because she is afraid of the appearance of the Jinn but the most important reason is her statement that according to the prophet they are not allowed to make a deal with the creature like Jinn. In this case, Aladdin keeps the lamp and the ring that contain Jinn inside, from his mother, and he still asks Jinn's help only when he needs the help. By obtaining the food presented in beautiful golden and silver trays and dishes, Aladdin and his mother can make a living. Aladdin sells the trays and dishes and Aladdin get acquainted with the sellers of jewelry. He gets knowledge of trading the golden or silver things, and in this way their living is getting better and Aladdin grows into a respected young man.

In Muslim's family cultural context, the values of family and roles of mother is very important especially for children's life. Not only as a person responsible for bearing the child, but she is also responsible with the whole life of the child. In the story of TSAWL Aladdin's mother has a big role in Aladdin's life, not only nurturing him in his childhood as a single mother, but also when Aladdin is grown up and intends to propose Sultan's the only daughter, Badr-el-Budur. Seen from the social cultural condition, Aladdin's idea seems impossible mission in his mother's eyes, however Aladdin forces his mother and arranges the strategy for proposing Sultan's daughter. Sultan is the highest social and political rank in the society, and his daughter also deserves the highest status in the region. On the other side, Aladdin and his mother's social status which is common folk, low rank people. However, supported by Aladdin's strategy, the old mother is proven to be able to do this important job. Aladdin's mother success in proposing Sultan's daughter also shows the appreciation to Aladdin's achievement of having much jewelry and other properties to be presented to the Sultan. In Muslim tradition, marriage proposal is done by the parents of the bridegroom, and in Aladdin's case, his only parent is his old widow mother, so that she becomes the most important person for Aladdin to reach his goal. This narration shows that family takes very important roles in Muslim community, and especially for a boy, a mother's effort is priceless. This idea supports the concept of the dignity and importance of family institution and the role of a mother for her child's success.

In Disney animated film, Aladdin's identity is constructed as an urchin, a poor young man who supported himself daily by stealing little things such as bread or fruits at the market just for survival. He lives with Abu, a little monkey that accompanies him all the days. He has no mother nor a family, and lives at a vacant part of a building, just for sleep. Aladdin in Disney is also depicted as a little thief who has to cheat the vendors in the market to get food or fruit. Along with this "little law violation" Aladdin is constructed as a kind,



generous boy. His habits of stealing bread or food is compensated with his generosity, in which sometimes he shares his bread or food to other poor children he met. In other words, Aladdin is a little thief and his crime is considered as a good crime justified by his poor condition to survive, so he only steals the food for his survival.

The constructed identity as a “free man” that values freedom, can be found out clearly in this animated film, in which Aladdin is depicted as a young man with bright skin, and represented as a man who does not practice any religion. While in TSAWL Aladdin and his mother are pious Muslim, the Disney represents Aladdin as an agnostic, a person who does not embrace a particular religion. Aladdin’s decision in his life is mostly relied on his common sense and freedom. The idea of freedom is strengthened in the narration when Aladdin makes decision of freeing the Jinn from his lamp so that the Jinn will not have to be submissive to Aladdin anymore. The other creatures accompanied him, Abu the monkey, Jinn, and magic carpet are all perceived by Aladdin as friends who help him in all his life business.

The identity of a man with a concept of freedom is presented in the animated film, especially through the idea of freeing the Jinn. The spirit of freedom is claimed to be the most important value in American and Western society, and the Jinn is described as a being that deserves to the freedom. Not only human being deserves to freedom but also all creatures has this basic value of freedom.

## **Conclusion**

The folktale and the animated film Aladdin have different way of articulating “Aladdin”. The folktale of Aladdin constructs the identity of Aladdin in social political context that is different from the context of the animated film. The identity of traditional, simple life of a Muslim community that affects the identity of Aladdin is obviously constructed in the folktale. On the other hand, the identity of Arabic people as barbaric is constructed in the narration of Disney animated Aladdin. Through the analysis, it can be found out that the changing of identities constructed in the film has a social political context. The Aladdin’s identity in the folktale is connected with the traditional Muslim in 10th century Chinese cultural setting, while the identity constructed in the Disney’s animated film is Aladdin in Arabic setting with the American mind and values of freedom and heroism. The value of family life that is celebrated much in the folktale is considered as not important in the Disney animated film Aladdin. Instead, the individual freedom is valued.

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